

U.S. Streetbike Fatalities Up Again

Worsening but murky accident picture requires in-depth study to be fully understood



This traffic-camera photo, which appears to show a car (no brake lights) running a light and colliding with a motorcyclist who was waiting at the light, is a reminder that you never know when you might wish you were wearing protective gear.

Motorcycling fatalities in the United States increased in 2004.

The complete report, based on data from the NHTSA's Fatal Accident Reporting System (FARS) is available on the DOT/NHTSA site at <http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/pdf/nrd-30/NCSA/Rpts/2003/2002EARelease.pdf>. (This does not reflect dirt bike or other off-road deaths.)

In 1997, after a decade and a half of decreasing motorcycle fatalities, 2116 motorcyclists died in accidents on American roads. That was 5.0% of the total number of



U.S. highway fatalities, which totaled 42,013. Since then, more American riders have died every year in street crashes. By 2001, when 3181 motorcycle riders died, the total had risen by more than 50 percent from the '97 figure. The 2002 total of 3276 meant that another 95 riders lost their lives on American roads. Though this is a smaller increase than recent years, it also meant that motorcycling fatalities have become

7.6% of the total American highway fatality picture, and the

In some areas, deer are a significant factor in motorcycle accidents.
Photo by Art Friedman.

only category of vehicle user showing consistent increases in deaths. The number of motorcycling injuries reported (which includes those riders who suffered long-term and permanent disabilities) has risen at a slower rate, from about 53,000 in 1997 to about 65,000 last year (a 23% increase). This also means that the number of fatalities has increased from 3.8 percent of the total of injury accidents to 4.8 percent. In other words a larger number of those motorcyclists who crash hard enough to hurt themselves and become statistics are apparently dying.



Sunset continues to be a dangerous time for motorcyclists. Photo by Fran Kuhn.

These numbers have led to a lot of speculation about the causes. Sales of new street bikes have more than doubled during since 1997, so it seems apparent that more people are riding motorcycles. Many of the patterns seem to run counter to those traditionally seen in motorcycle accidents. For example, the motorcycle accident caused by the driver of another vehicle who violates the rider's right-of-way at an urban intersection is apparently becoming less common than the

motorcyclist who crashes all by himself on a rural road. Where riders in there 20s once formed the largest group in fatal motorcycle-accident statistics, older riders (over 40) have become the dominant segment. Alcohol involvement continues to be a major factor, but has declined during the last few years. More and more riders have received formal rider education even as the fatality numbers have risen. The apparent increase of fatal accidents as a percentage of the total accident pictures suggests that we are doing a poorer job of protecting ourselves--perhaps because fewer states have helmet laws and more riders are wearing non-protective novelty helmets that don't meet DOT standards in states where helmets are required--or that we are crashing harder. Cruisers are apparently a bigger part of the accident picture, but then they are also a bigger part of the bike-sales picture.



These days there seem to be more rural, single-bike accidents than collisions with other vehicles in town.

Aside from the hard numbers and a few details (such as other vehicle involvement, day or night, alcohol involvement) that can be mined from other sources, there is little real information on the causes of motorcycle accidents in the 21st century. Without an on-scene, in-depth study that also looks at the motorcycle population at-risk (that is, a study that looks at the motorcycles that crash and compares them to motorcycles who don't crash in the same situation), anybody who attempts to fashion a remedy to the worsening accident situation is just shooting in the dark. In fact, we don't know for sure if the accidents aren't simply happening because more motorcyclists are riding and riding more frequently and more time and distance.

Unfortunately, NHTSA currently lacks the budget to commission the sort of study that would shed meaningful light on the current causes of motorcycle accidents and fatalities. Such a study would cost an estimated \$2 to \$3 million dollars. The American Motorcyclist Association (AMA) is lobbying Congress to provide the

necessary funds, and reports that many congressmen have assured their support. It has provided an easy way to let your representatives know about your feelings on the subject. See **Act Now to Make Motorcycling Safer** in this same section of the *Motorcycle Cruiser* site for details.